



## **Slow Anthropology. Negotiating Difference with the lu Mien written by Hjørleifer Jonsson**

Horstmann, Alexander

*Published in:*  
Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde

*Publication date:*  
2015

*Document version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Document license:*  
[Unspecified](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Horstmann, A. (2015). Slow Anthropology. Negotiating Difference with the lu Mien written by Hjørleifer Jonsson. *Bijdragen Tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde*, 171(1), 130-132.

### Hjorleifur Jonsson

*Slow Anthropology. Negotiating Difference with the Iu Mien.* Ithaca, New York: Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications, 2014, xv + 154 pp. ISBN 9780877277941, price: USD 51.95 (hardback); 9870877277644, 23.95 (paperback)

This is a very important and beautiful book. The subject is the troubled history of the Iu Mien from Northern Laos and the trajectories of the Iu Mien self in Laos, Thailand and re-settlement from the refugee camps in Northern Thailand, to California and Oregon in the United States. Jonsson, who has been known for his work about the Mien in Thailand, has spent a lot of his fieldwork time with re-settled Iu Mien in the United States and has gathered rich material on the narratives about the exodus of the Iu Mien from Laos.

But the book is more than just an ethnography of the Iu Mien, although the ethnographic data are beautifully presented—it is also a book about the representation of an Asian highland people and of anthropology itself. The book argues strongly, sometimes polemically, against current and influential scholarship that according to the author tends to essentialize highland people and freeze movement. Instead, Jonsson is interested in the negotiation of identity, in the power relations that shape identity, in the navigation of these people and especially in movement, in the way that geographical mobility necessarily impacts on identification and new social ties in transnational social spaces. Jonsson has devoted considerable time to his research on the Iu Mien and has done multi-sited fieldwork and has explored field-sites of the Iu Mien in Laos, Thailand, and the US. This sequence of slow anthropology, as he calls it, also shapes the organization of the monograph.

This polemic is directed not only against some influential scholarship of structural and cognitive anthropology that tends to neglect the aspirations of the highland people to configure their relationships with the state and the lowland people, but it is especially directed against the nostalgia of anthropologists to find ‘pure’ people ‘unpolluted’ by modern civilization and especially against the recent and very influential work of James C. Scott on state avoidance as a key mode of resistance. The author states that the new literature on Zomia reproduces much of the flaws of the anthropology of the ‘primitive’ people that Jonsson believes is the origin of much wrong representation of the highland people and their identifications.

Thus he considers a whole chapter on a discussion of the approaches to Zomia, a term coined by Willem van Schendel and taken up by Jean Michaud and James C. Scott. Van Schendel considered Zomia as an imaginary area to illustrate that there are large areas such as the Southeast Asian massif that represents an area with close cultural and linguistic connections that

has not made it to established area studies. But Jonsson especially contests the romanticized notion of everyday resistance in Scott's *The Art of not being Governed* (2009), a book that stimulated large debate. The case of the Iu Mien and that of other hill-tribe people, say the Karen, show that the Iu Mien actually take their destiny into their own hands, have aspirations about the way that they participate in the public and have participated in a global traffic of the cold war and the subsequent establishment of a refugee regime and politically motivated resettlement to the US.

The limitation to state avoidance and subsistence is not able to capture those dynamics. This angle is pursued in the second chapter on frontiers where Jonsson again argues that the ethnography of the highland people should not be separated from lowland society and the nation-state, but should really concentrate on the manifold entanglements of the highlanders at local, national, and global levels. Jonsson cites Oscar Salemink's work on the Vietnamese Central Highlands as exemplary for a sharp historical deconstruction of the different levels of analysis. It seems that a problem in Scott's book was that many of the scholars who were cited to support Scott's thesis on hidden resistance as a way of life did not feel that their work was rightly cited or represented. Jonsson seems to argue that there is no alternative to careful, *longue durée* anthropology that focuses on the interfaces of the highland people with, for example, lowlanders.

The case of the Mien, which is nicely illustrated in subsequent chapters, shows that hill-tribe people navigate by adjusting strategically to the policies of the nation-state, for example, by playing to the expectations of the nation-state in state-sponsored sports and how the Iu Mien have been exploited and instrumentalized by US policies in the Indochina war. Iu Mien recounted how guerrilla leaders have tricked them, finding themselves in a war in which there was nothing to gain, but only to suffer. The collective punishment of whole Iu Mien villages pushed many Iu Mien into the refugee camps. One thing, I noticed, is that there was not much solidarity forthcoming from the Mien in Thailand, a fact that indicates the relative isolation of the Mien in Thailand from the Iu Mien in Northern Laos, again a result of the strong impact of the state.

The next chapter is dedicated to the Iu Mien who have to manage a completely alien world in the US. Of course, integration for the first settlers is almost impossible, while the second generation finds it much easier to integrate as the youth shares many of their interests with other American kids. Religion makes a provocative but brief appearance. Jonsson generally leaves much space for the voices of his informants and interlocutors, and he avoids generalizations and easy recipes for identity.

Slow anthropology, then, is about listening to your informants to reveal how ethnic difference is constantly negotiated. The book is passionately written, and also puts the Iu Mien into a much wider academic debate on representation and relations of the Iu Mien. The book is not only about slow anthropology, but also about the workings of power and how people's entanglements in the life-worlds that most affect them necessarily shape their identifications. Those who are looking for a complex, multi-sited ethnography will be rewarded, those who look for a classical, local ethnography of the Iu Mien in Northern Laos will probably be disappointed.

*Alexander Horstmann*

University of Copenhagen

*Fnt592@hum.ku.dk*

### Reference

Scott, James C. (2009). *The Art of not being governed. An anarchist History of upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven CT etc.: Yale University Press.